

**ESCAPE ROAD**

# Citroen-Ford Traction 'Arriere'

*A WWII hybrid, this French tourer became a U.S. runner*

By Roger Barlow

**W**ars, since the earliest hand-to-hand versions, have always produced, seemingly as natural by-products, crops of bastards and hybrids. Some as ugly as homemade sin, others creations of beauty and charm.

The subject of this page, depending on personal standards of automotive beauty, and perhaps from the angle it's viewed, can be either or both downright ugly and rather handsome. What is beyond dispute is its undoubted charm and entertaining performance.

This hybrid was a true product of WWII. I acquired it in 1943 when I was sent out to Warner Bros. in Hollywood to supervise the remaking of a film the U.S. Navy considered unacceptable. As I left Warner's by the north gate the second day, I could hardly believe my eyes—half a block away was a Citroen Traction Avant with a FOR SALE sign on it!

Several hundred of these front-drive Citroens had been imported by Challenger Motors between 1937 and the start of the war. I lived in Hollywood when they first arrived, but at the price of a Buick Roadmaster (the result of Smoot-Hawley tariffs), I could then only look and yearn. Now here was one when I really needed a car and the price was a mere \$300! There *had* to be a catch to it.

And there was. It was partly so cheap because the transmission had broken beyond repair. This was an all too common Citroen problem which had already exhausted the U.S. supply of needed parts. A tooth would break in low gear, become jammed and the resulting pressure on the two gear shafts would usually be so great that the transmission case would itself break apart beyond repair.

In this instance the owner, being an enterprising mechanic and something of an artist with a welding torch, took truly drastic action—scrapping the entire Citroen engine-gearbox-differential unit in favor of a V8 Ford engine and transmission ... converting the Traction Avant to Traction Arriere.

As you can imagine, the amount of cutting and welding needed just to make room for the normal Ford torque-tube driveline was intimidating. The transverse rear spring and the Ford rear axle were also utilized.

Somehow. I just don't know how.

I seem to remember that the V8 engine was set a bit higher in the frame than the four-cylinder Citroen unit. That enabled the V of the block to clear the forward-angled bracing of the firewall structure. The firewall itself was opened up for the clutch



**His onboard water supply exhausted, the author visited a railroad water tank to refresh his hybrid (above). During WWII, with gas rationing, roads were devoid of traffic (left)**

housing and transmission (which actually lived inside the body, above the floor pan), for there was simply no room to run the driveline below the unitary chassis.

The additional weight on the front suspension was less than you might think. This is because the engine was set well back with the transmission and rear motor mount being in the front compartment. In any case, torsion bars allowed ground clearance to be reset by the simple adjustment Citroen provided.

As considerably more than \$300 worth of time and effort had been expended just on the installation of the V8 engine alone—never mind its value and that of the Citroen itself—why was the price so low? What else was wrong?

From 50 feet away it had been clear a repaint was in order. But as I got close enough to see inside the car, it appeared that at least one battle of WWII had been fought

there: No rear seat cushion existed. The front seats were torn and sagging. The head lining was burned from welding sparks. There was no carpeting (and had it been there, it would not have fit over the partially exposed Ford driveline). There was no radiator shell, the Citroen hood resting on felt padding over the bare radiator.

But it *ran!* Oh, *how* it ran!

The creator of this wartime hybrid knew damn well that the Ford low gear was not going to shed its teeth, so he demonstrated by letting the clutch out with a bang at about 3500 rpm. We took off with tires smoking and the tail end wagging joyfully. I had my wallet in hand before the first intersection.

Thus I acquired the zippiest Citroen ever, even though it was no longer driven *avant*. Indeed, putting all that V8 power through the rear wheels of a car that was at least 500 pounds lighter than the ones Henry built introduced me to the joys and advantages of rear wheel steering! It was not, like the new Japanese 4ws, speed related and user friendly. My Citroen-Ford's rear end was strictly throttle controlled. In the wet, throttle *uncontrolled*, I soon discovered.

A week of full-time work at the studio dealt with the reshooting. The editing, sound effects and music were then in the hands of the Warner technicians leaving me plenty of time to get my new *holide* repainted and properly upholstered between screenings to check on the film's progress. In a junkyard I found a rather Delage-like radiator shell that fit the contours of the Citroen hood.

So pleased was the Navy with my work that it granted me enough gasoline and time for a leisurely drive back to Washington, D.C.

Up U.S. 1 to San Francisco, then east into the mountains and desert country ... and trouble. My hybrid, such a joy on the mountain roads, with its power and precise rack and pinion steering, began to overheat. All would be well, then suddenly the pot would be on the boil. The water pump was replaced, thermostats removed, ignition advanced. Nothing helped. Sometimes it boiled when on level ground; sometimes it stopped boiling on a grade. For a couple of days I was less than overjoyed with my automotive pride. Somewhere in Colorado, when I was adding a dose of much-needed water, I noticed, just visible inside the header tank, the tip of a strip of thin copper about two inches wide lying on top of the radiator core. Long-nosed pliers served to extract the eight-inch strip which restricted the flow of water and caused the erratic overheating.

It seemed downhill all the way to Washington. *Vive le Citroen-Ford, voiture tres unique.* ■